
RED
SKY
Travis Tufo



Red Sky

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Dedications: Thank you to my beta-readers, Vix Kirkpatrick, Joy Buchanan and to the first responders and men and women of the armed forces, you have my admiration and respect for all the sacrifices you endure to keep us all safe.

Table of Contents

“*To my dearest Maria,*

This may be the last letter I send to you for a while. But don’t despair my dear; it is because my officer says the war is rounding an end and has me going on more missions to dwindle down the Germans. Although the frequent deployments take a toll on my body, it means that I am one step closer to seeing you again. That in itself gives me enough strength to push on. Any moment now I could be finishing my last act of duty and will be able to hop in a truck and drive back home. It fills my heart with joy to think that we could be so close to seeing each other once again, but this time I will be home for good. Continue to keep busy my dear and remember that I love you and miss you.

Sincerely,
Joseph”

Chapter One

Riding in the back of a jeep returning from his previous mission, Joseph read the letter aloud as he wrote it on the sheet of tattered paper he had been holding. He sat there in his blood soaked Soviet uniform with his helmet on his lap and fifteen German dog tags inside of it. His helmet was dented, scratched and had a bullet hole in it. It had the name Maria carved into it, but you could only see it if you looked hard enough through the dried blood and scratches. Joseph was a Soviet soldier who stood 6-feet and was pushing 245 pounds of solid muscle.

He owned a farm where all he did was physical labor, making him the muscular soldier he was. He lived on his farm with his beloved wife Maria.

Drafted into the war, he became notorious for being a skilled sniper, brutal killer, and an unmatched reconnaissance leader. He was more of a mercenary than a soldier, due to the fact that he was put into a battalion where his officer would assign him and his fellow soldiers certain missions.

Those who survived were sent to do another until they were all dead. For this reason, Joseph met, and shortly thereafter had to bury many of his own friends. Everyone in his starting squad had died, along with the next three squads. Remarkably, he always managed to find his way back alive to his officer, who gave him his next mission with a smirk on his face. Joseph even out lived his starting officer who died in a plane that was shot down by German anti-air cannons. Due to his officer's death, Joseph was transferred over to another battalion that functioned in a similar way.

The commanding officer would give the soldiers their missions and hoped they returned for another. The soldiers slept in tents around their campsite in a rural area surrounded by trees.

The sunlight never seemed to hit this campsite; it was always enshrouded in dark grey clouds covering a red sky. It was an eerie place to set up, but it worked. As for the commanding officer, he had his own personal quarters in a small building. Inside the building were two rooms, one with a desk where the officer handed out missions to his soldiers and another with a bed where he would rarely sleep.

It was in this battalion Joseph would meet a man equally as savage as himself who would become his best friend—a man by the name of Vladimir. He was a huge man; when he stood next to Joseph; he made Joseph look like a young boy. He was close to seven feet and weighed no less than 280 pounds. Jokingly, but often in a serious way his squad mates referred to him as Vlad the Impaler because he would often de-limb and brutally mutilate German soldiers with his bayonet. For every kill Vlad had with a bullet, he had three more with his bayonet, which he called his “dear Sasha”.

It only seemed right that these two almost inhumane brutes would become great friends and would fight for each other with their own lives at stake. Mission after mission these men would return to their officer, eagerly awaiting their next chance to kill.

Joseph and Vladimir did everything their commanding officer assigned them, from killing multiple guards outside an enemy encampment allowing a battalion of Soviet soldiers to enter unseen, to hunting down and murdering German officers and sergeants in order to demoralize the Nazis.

Neither of them knew the meaning of mercy, which meant gallons of blood were often spilled to complete a mission, necessary or not. They were not against killing a woman or a child if it meant they got to return to their commanding officer with the dog tags he asked for.

The war almost became a game to them; they would see who could collect more of the metallic ID’s by killing the most men, or even who could kill the most unarmed people in a town with nothing but their bayonets. They became so notorious in their ruthless kills that their names would be in German newspapers offering rewards for their heads; later their names were in newspapers telling Germans to stay clear of them.

Chapter Two

Joseph only fought in this war to once again be with his wife Maria.

After hundreds of missions and even more Germans murdered along the way, his commanding officer, Viktor, presented Joseph with the opportunity to see her again.

The day after Joseph returned from a mission where he was ordered to track down a German medical caravan and "demobilize" every single truck, Viktor entered his tent to speak to him.

Viktor watched as Joseph bandaged his thigh, which had received a bullet wound from a German mp40 sub machine gun.

"Hello, Joseph. I see you have returned from your trip," Viktor spoke in his faded, rough voice.

He paused to cough, as he was an avid smoker. No sooner after he finished coughing he began to light up a large cigar.

"You're lucky that bullet only nicked your femur bone, "Viktor said with a smirk.

He was an older man with all grey hair, his uniform always kept slick and neat. He liked being in power and always strived for his soldiers to acknowledge his superiority over them. A scar ripped through the top of his forehead down through his milky white left eye and ended in a small hook midway down his cheek.

"Sir, don't you have something better to do? Like go order some soldiers to kiss your ass before you send them to their death? " Joseph asked sarcastically with a smile on his face. Ignoring the pain in his thigh, he stood up to be eye level with Viktor.

"You better watch what you say to me, or I might have to refrain from informing you of the good news I have been waiting to tell you," Viktor responded as he blew a huge smoke cloud into Joseph's face. Joseph's eyebrows rose. He was clearly interested in what Viktor had to say.

Ignoring the smoke he asked, "What are you talking about old man? The only time you gave me good news was the day you told me the bullet I took right in my chest wasn't fatal."

" Ahhh…yes I remember that day. Well, if you weren't such a soft solider I wouldn't have felt the need to tell you that you were going to be all right." Viktor laughed and paused to cough once again. He stopped to gather his composure before continuing.

"But seriously Joseph, I do have rather good news for you. I have thought for quite a long time now that you have done more than your fair share for the motherland. You will go down in history as a hero to the Russians and a nightmare to the Germans forever.

Stories will be told of Joseph the Tyrant to dirty little German boys and girls before they lay down to sleep in the rubble of where their streets used to be."

"All right sir, I get it. Cut to the chase!" Joseph said, eagerly awaiting this news Viktor spoke of.

"Patience is the only thing you never learned in the military. My news is that if you do one more mission for me, one simple mission that requires little to no effort for you, I will let you go. "

A silence filled the tent. The two men stood there, eyes locked.

"Let me go where, sir?"

Joseph was playing dumb, but also wondering if Viktor was going to tell him the incredible news he wanted to hear.

"Go wherever you wish. Whether that means you stay here in this tent till you rot away, or back to this Maria girl I hear you talk of so much."

Viktor turned to the slit in the tent from where he entered before Joseph could reply and ducked down to exit.

"I'll leave the briefing on my desk tomorrow for you to look over," Viktor called from outside as he walked towards his quarters.

Joseph sat back down and soaked in the information he was just presented with. He looked around his tent and then to his leg as if to see if he was dreaming.

He dug his finger into his wound, the pain helping him realize that yes indeed he was awake. Knowing he would never get to sleep, he lay down on his cot, thoughts churning.

Chapter Three

When the next day came he opened his tent to the same grey clouds and same red sky he had grown to know.

He hobbled on his hurt leg past all his fellow comrades, not returning any of their greetings.

He reached his officer’s quarters and very slowly lifted his hand to the doorknob and grasped it. As he did adrenalin filled his body. He turned the knob and opened the door, seeing no one. He wasn’t surprised though. Viktor never seemed to be around. He was always at some brothel or off trying to get more cigars.

Joseph approached the desk one slow step at a time. He could feel and hear his breathing getting louder and harder. He saw a yellow folder that he knew contained possibly the best news he would ever receive.

He grabbed the folder and held it in his hands for a second, thoughts of Maria and his farm rushing into his head. Taking a deep breath, he ripped it open and immediately read what it had to say.

No one was ever excited to get a new mission. Soldiers always waited in their tents and hoped that on that day their commanding officer wouldn’t enter to hand them a dreaded yellow folder.

But today was different for Joseph. He began to weep as he read, something he hadn’t done since he left Maria two years ago.

He was now so close to seeing her. All he had to do was complete one last mission, one that didn’t even seem to be that much work to him. After reading through the briefing, Joseph returned to his tent where he spent the next three days resting his leg and re-reading what was inside the folder.

“All I have to do is find one man. One man is my way to Maria,” he mumbled to himself.

Joseph spent the next two months healing and growing to hate this “one man”.

The man had never done anything to Joseph; they’d yet to even speak. But with every fiber of his being he despised this man.

Joseph stopped talking to anyone other than Vladimir and Viktor. He was too preoccupied thinking of how he was going to kill this man, a German whose only job was to run a factory that produced parts used to build German planes.

Joseph thought to himself that this one man was the entire reason he was away from Maria. He couldn’t just simply kill this man; he had to make this man suffer. Joseph became more bloodthirsty than ever before.

Chapter Four

Another two weeks passed before Viktor returned to Joseph's tent.

"It's time to go," he said to Joseph. He immediately turned around and left.

Joseph grabbed his bag, helmet, gun, and more importantly the picture of his wife he kept under his pillow. He followed Viktor to a German truck that had been stolen from a previous operation.

Joseph threw his gear in the truck.

"Do you like it? It was my idea, "a familiar voice called out as he approached the truck.

"Vlad, are you here to see me off?"

Joseph's face lit up as his good friend Vlad walked up.

"See you off? Always the jokes with you. No man, I'm here to make sure you don't take another unnecessary bullet to that pretty face of yours."

"I went over the mission briefing hundreds of times and Viktor didn't mention anything about a partner. Plus, this is one of the simplest things I've ever been assigned."

"Ah, well I see you've lost your touch lately. I mean you did get shot! I'm just here as some added protection. And what? You wanted to go off and finish your final assignment without me? Let me ask you something Joseph. How many times have I saved your ass?"

"How many more times have I saved yours?" Joseph countered

"Clearly that is beside the point. But I couldn't let you go off and kill this man alone. This could be our last time spilling blood together. Enough of the chitchat—get in the truck."

Vladimir threw his equipment in the back and quickly jumped into the driver's seat before Joseph had a chance. Joseph settled for the passenger seat.

"You two pussies done making out over there? Get the hell out of here already!" Viktor yelled at them as he walked towards his quarters. Joseph laughed and prepared himself for a three to four day drive to Berlin, where the factory and the German man Joseph had grown to hate were.

Chapter Five

“So tell me Joseph. How did you manage to take a bullet to your thigh dealing with a MEDICAL caravan?” Vlad asked with a snicker as he drove off towards Berlin.

“Do you want the whole story? Or do you want me to tell you that a German pointed a gun at me and pulled the trigger?”

“Eh, we got time, give me the whole story.”

“That’s the truth.

“Well, it was Nikolai, that tall stupid man Viktor picked up from some deep part of Siberia and me. We were driving to an interception point on some hill where we would be able to see the medical caravan and its escort at a good vantage point”.

“We got there about an hour early so we could set up. We covered ourselves in brush and pointed a rocket propelled grenade or RPG at the road where the leading escort would have to drive past. Time passed until we could finally see the Germans approaching. They were about 45 minutes late”.

“I lined up a perfect shot and pulled the trigger. The explosion blew up only about a foot in front of the lead truck, lifting the front end and sending it crashing back down, breaking the front axle. With the front truck unable to operate, the caravan and truck behind it had nowhere to go. Germans came pouring out of the two escort trucks like a goddamn clown car to see what caused the explosion. So with stupid ass Nikolai next to me we grabbed our scoped Mosin Nagants and proceeded to slaughter the dirty rats where they stood. Shot after shot I blew men’s heads clear off their shoulders. Fifteen soldiers came rushing out of the trucks and I’d say I killed a good eight of the bastards before they even spotted our position”.

“Once they knew where we were they started spraying us with rounds. I jumped up and ran for our truck. But stupid Nikolai just lay there and got peppered in bullets. He looked like he went through a goddamn meat grinder when they stopped firing at him. They literally severed limbs with all the bullets they put into that poor fool. He was just a pile of blood and chunks of meat afterwards. Lucky for me though he managed to kill about three Germans in his, oh I don’t know, 12 shots fired. He always was a hell of a shot.”

“I never did like that Nikolai guy. It was like talking to a damn rock. But go on.”

“So I was pinned down behind my truck and had four Germans slowly marching up the hill towards me. I had one grenade on me, so I pulled the pin on that bitch and hoped to hell it would get them as I chucked it over my shoulder.”

“No way, you’re trying to tell me you killed four Nazis with one grenade?”

“If you’d quit interrupting me, I’d let you know.”

“Sorry, it’s just I’ve personally seen how bad you are with grenades, but go on.”

“So I threw that bad boy right over my shoulder. It landed a good 30 feet away from them and proceeded to roll down the hill.”

“That’s what I expected to hear,” Vlad said as his face turned into a big smile.

“Yeah, so I lift my head over the bed of the truck to sneak a look at my failure exploding at the bottom of the hill by a tree and got right back under cover again. Then I peaked my head up one more time, popped off a few more shots with my rifle and only managed to pick off one guy with my last few rounds. Now I was out of ammo, grenades, and dumb ass partners”.

"I'll be honest I panicked a bit, but the second I heard a footstep on the other side of the truck I slapped the bayonet on my rifle, threw my helmet in the truck bed to distract them, sprinted right around the front of my vehicle and threw my bayonet right in the upper shoulder of one of the Germans pretty goddamn hard. As the blade of the bayonet ripped through his shoulder, blood spattered all over my face and torso and he let out a high-pitched screech. I pulled the blade from his shoulder and quickly gave him one smack to his face with the butt of my gun. With one loud cracking sound I know I got him right in the temple. He dropped to his knees, spitting up more than a mouthful of blood and fell to the ground face first. As he hit the ground I swung my bayonet at the next German, who was only just turning to see his brother die. My swing was almost perfect! I nearly sliced his head right off his shoulders! As the skin ripped apart on either side of my blade, blood spurted out on me again. When he hit the ground, he reached for his neck uselessly trying to stop the blood flowing from his wound. But he wasn't dead yet. I didn't want a good kill to go to waste so I, being the good man I am, decided to put the scum out of his misery. I lifted up my boot and brought it down as hard as I could on his pathetic whimpering face."

Joseph smirked in an almost evil way. This really grabbed Vlad's attention. He looked Joseph right in the eyes with an excited look on his face and said "Details, I need details goddamn it!"

"Well, as my boot crashed through his skull, which you could hear from a mile away, bits of his brain flew onto the truck, my pants, his dead friend next to him, and littered the ground with little pink and red chunks of head residue everywhere. I've been picking that man's thoughts out of my boots ever since," Joseph said, laughing at his own joke.

"Wait a second, you're one Nazi and a shot to the leg short in this story," Vlad said, interrupting Joseph's laughter.

"Yeah, you're as surprised as I was. I looked up from the second man to find that the third was nowhere to be seen. I figured he was about 10 feet away, aiming down the sights at me. I set my gun on the ground, ready to die honestly, but then I heard some scuffling in a nearby bush. I immediately knew it was him. Who knew he was going to be terrified out of his mind and out of ammo? So I walked over to the bush and pulled it back to see a young German no more than 18 years old. He was sitting there crying with his eyes closed, rocking back and forth!"

“Please tell me you left the poor kid alone and came back to camp.” Vladmir said sarcastically.

“That’s exactly what happened. After the little bastard accidently shot his gun at me right into my goddamn thigh.”

“Accidently?”

“The kid wasn’t even holding the gun; it must have brushed up against something and went off, right into my leg. I dropped to the ground and lay there right in front of this little bitch in the fetal position.”

“So this kid had at least three opportunities to kill you by now?”

“At least, but after laying there for a minute or two bleeding, I rocked myself onto my knees, grabbed the kid by his face, pulled him out of the bush and threw him to the ground. I don’t know what happened to me though; I mean I knew I wanted to beat this kid to death with my fists, slowly and painfully. And trust me I know I should have too, but something clicked in my head and I decided to just kick his face in with my good leg instead.”

“God damn morals always get in the way.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So what happened to the medical caravan?”

“Oh yeah, the whole reason I was there. I stumbled down the hill to the medical truck and opened it from the back. I don’t know what the hell the Germans are doing nowadays. I mean I expected when the door swung open to see a ton of medical supplies like syringes, pills, bandages, crutches, and all that good stuff. But instead I open it up to find four Jewish men, who were beaten pretty badly with broken arms and gashes on their legs and chests. I only knew they were Jewish because they had the Star of David on the black and white uniforms they were in. They were just skin and bones. It also seemed like someone tried to dye their eyes blue. I asked them what the hell was going on, but none of them had the strength to speak. Probably didn’t understand me, anyway.”

“What the hell?”

“That’s what I said.”

“So you left them there?”

“I couldn’t bring them all back. I thought they had a disease or something—they looked like the plague had hit them. Plus this wasn’t in my briefing.”

“What did Viktor say when you told him about the Jews?”

“He said he knew the Germans were up to something but that it didn’t seem like that big of a deal. He thought that maybe they were just trying out new chemical warfare on some random Jewish men.”

“That’s weird man. I wonder what the hell they were doing in the back of that truck.”

“Beats the hell out of me.”

Chapter SIX

After Joseph's story it grew quiet in the truck for the next few hours. Joseph grabbed the picture of Maria and just looked at it, thinking of all their good times together. Vlad just blankly drove until it was too dark to see in front of the truck. When night fell Vlad pulled over to some old house that was pretty badly damaged. The building must have taken an artillery shell right through the middle of it.

"Ahh…I could call this place home!" Vladimir yelled into the night as he slammed the door to the truck and headed for the old, crumbling house.

"Brilliant. Let's just alert every goddamn Nazi in the area that we're going to be sleeping here tonight."

"The more Nazis that I invite to come fight me right now, the less I'll have to deal with in my future. This isn't the last mission for everyone, you know."

"Oh really, you're going to pull that card now, huh? Maybe if you killed half as many men as I have, old Viktor would be letting you go too."

Vlad didn't reply. He was standing on what was left of the doorstep. He knocked on a wall next to where the door would be standing if it still existed, and yelled, "Knock, knock is anyone home?"

"You're an idiot. I'm honestly surprised you aren't dead."

"You and me both," Vladimir said as he walked over to the burnt remains of a couch.

"I call this couch!" Vlad shouted to Joseph as he jumped onto the decrepit piece of furniture. Joseph continued exploring the other rooms.

"That's fine by me. I found a fully intact bed in this room!" Joseph shouted back with a grin.

"You lying bastard!" Vladimir yelled, jumping off the couch and running through a coffee table on his way into Joseph's room. When he got to the entrance of the room he looked around to see Joseph lying on a huge king sized bed. The room was fully intact and was the only place in the house not affected by the bombshell. Vladimir looked around once more and threw up a specific finger to Joseph before leaving.

"Goodnight buddy. I'll see you in...,"

"Fuck off," Vlad yelled at Joseph, cutting him off.

"Love you too," Joseph whispered under his breath before he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Vladimir walked out to the truck and searched around for a minute or two looking for something. Finally he found it—his bayonet.

"Ahh, Sasha, you didn't think I'd sleep without you, did you? Come on, let's go."

Vladimir's relationship with his blade was a strange one, but it didn't bother him, Joseph, or the men he thrust it through.

Vladimir returned to the doorstep of the house, but before he entered he heard the crack of a branch in the distance. He looked up in the direction of the noise as adrenaline quickly started to fill his body. Unfortunately it was near to pitch black and he could only see the grass about two or three feet in front of him.

He stood there for a few minutes before deciding it was probably just a deer or something. He stepped into the house. Giving Sasha a goodnight kiss before setting her down on the table next to his couch, he lay down and proceeded to fall asleep.

Chapter Seven

After a few hours of sleep, Vlad was awakened by the sound of Germans yelling at him with the barrel of a Gewehr pressed to the back of his head. The moon had taken this opportune time to rise and was shining through the many cracks in the side of the house.

"What the fuck?" Vlad yelled as he quickly put up his hands as if to show he meant no harm. The yelling woke up Joseph in the next room. He got out of bed silently and crept over to the doorway to see what was going on. He saw three Germans surrounding Vlad, guns drawn. Two soldiers grabbed Vlad and hoisted him up off the couch as the third soldier kicked the table out of his way. The bayonet skittered and spun across the dirty floor.

"If you're going to shoot me, just do it you pussies!" He yelled at the uncomprehending Germans, hands still above his head.

Joseph continued to peek around the doorway, a military issue knife in his hand. The knife was so long, it looked like a borderline samurai sword. He stood there waiting for a good opportunity to strike.

When he saw the Germans force Vlad to start walking out of the house, he noticed Vlad stopped right within reach of Sasha. Vlad turned around right at that moment to see Joseph in the doorway. The entire time the Germans were screaming at Vlad to keep moving. When Vlad and Joseph locked eyes, Vlad gave a nod, and Joseph darted full speed towards the three soldiers, whose backs were turned towards him.

Reaching the soldier closest to him, Joseph lifted up his knife and gave one swift thrust into the back of the soldier's neck. The long blade went in one side and out the other. The German tried to scream but only managed a bubbly gurgle as Joseph pulled the blade out. Drowning in his blood, the solider collapsed into a bloody heap.

The second soldier turned in time to see two blue eyes coming towards him. Before he could react, the soldier felt a sharp intense pain. Joseph had shoved his blade into the meat of this man's intestines. With shaking hands, the soldier grabbed Joseph's arm and looked down at the blade. Joseph turned the blade to the left and then quickly to the right, cutting into the man's intestines and destroying what was left of the man's dinner. Screams filled the room.

The soldier switched his gaze to Joseph's eyes once more as if to see death itself. Joseph smiled slightly and removed the blade, watching a rush of blood pore out. Blood lust drove Joseph to stab the man several more times until he was far past deceased.

Hearing the screams, the third German spun around, turning away from Vlad. As he did Vlad grabbed his beloved Sasha from the floor and flung it into the ribs of the German who had the gun pressed to his head. Vlad swung the bayonet with so much strength it ripped through skin and muscle like a hot knife through butter and smashed its way through the man's rib cage.

As the blade broke through one of his ribs the man fell to the ground, screaming in agony. Joseph was done with his second kill in time to see Vladimir hop onto the screaming German soldier and beat at his face with his paw like fists.

Vlad was in a rage and threw one bone breaking punch after another. Vlad continued relentlessly, even though the man had stopped screaming around five punches in. The sound of the man's skull cracking mixed with the blood flying around the room was the sign for Joseph to pull Vlad off the man. Joseph looked down at the beaten man and noticed what little remained of his face was nearly level with the floor. The man's eye sockets were beaten to tiny little slivers of bone and ground into the floorboards and into the back of the man's' head. Joseph adjusted his gaze to Vlad, grabbed his arm and pulled Vlad's fist closer to his face to get a better look.

Past the thick layer of blood you could see tiny little bone pieces lodged into his knuckles and fingers. He let go of Vlad's hand and gave him a grin. Both men burst into laughter. It was a truly sickening scene.

"You literally, I mean literally beat that man's face into the ground!"

"He shouldn't have pressed a gun to the back of my head."

"Ahh that's funny. But of course you wouldn't have been able to do that if I didn't save your ass," Joseph said as he put his hands on his hips and struck a heroic pose.

"Save my ass? You were in your room sleeping like a princess. I would have been able to deal with the situation."

"I had to kill two of them!" Joseph yelled.

"All you did was take two thirds of my fun away."

“Fuck you. You’re welcome,” Joseph said as he threw up two middle fingers and walked back to his room. Vladimir returned to the body of the soldier he brutally killed and removed the bayonet from his ribcage.

“We would have been able to deal with these three, huh Sasha?” Vlad said with a smile on his face as he used the collar of the dead German soldiers jacket to wipe the blood off his bayonet before wiping the blood off his own hands on the soldiers chest.

He dragged the dead down the hallway and into an empty pantry. Then he righted the table and set Sasha back down with the same goodnight kiss. He lay back down on the couch to fall asleep, hopefully this time without anything hindering his sleep.

Chapter Eight

The two Russians managed to sleep until dawn without any more interruptions, and without any questions as to where the soldiers came from. In the morning Joseph opened his eyes to a bright blue sky and a lovely view of the sun, which he could see through the giant hole in the roof of the room next to the one he was sleeping in. It was something he hadn't seen in a while; he was almost shocked to see such a beautiful sight. He lay in bed and soaked it in for a while before he threw the sheets off of himself and walked out of the room to see his friend sprawled out in a certainly uncomfortable position, still asleep. Joseph gave Vlad one good nudge and he awoke.

"How did you sleep there, buddy?" Joseph sarcastically asked trying unsuccessfully to hold back a smile. Vladimir reached for his neck as if he was in pain, not bothering to open his eyes just yet.

"Ohhh, my neck kills. Next stop I get the bed," Vladimir said, standing up with one hand rubbing his neck and the other wiping the crust from his eyes as he ignored Joseph's sarcastic question.

"Let's get our stuff ready and leave before the Germans' friends show up wondering where they went."

"Great idea," Vlad said with his eyes still shut. Joseph returned to his room to grab his stuff as Vladimir collected his bag. They both walked out of the house and headed for the truck. As they reached it Vladimir quickly jumped in the passenger seat.

"I thought you were going to be my personal driver?" Joseph asked as he opened the door on the driver's side. Vladimir mumbled something and fell asleep. Joseph stood there for a few seconds, thinking about the fact that he was only two days away from clearing the final hurdle in the way of seeing his dear Maria. This sent shivers through his body and at the same time motivated him. He started up the truck and floored it towards Berlin.

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After four hours of driving straight through plains and great views of nothingness, Vlad woke up right in time to notice that the truck's fuel tank was approaching empty.

“Trucks need gas to run you know,” Vlad said, yawning and stretching out his huge muscular arms. Joseph startled at the sound of his voice. He looked down at the gauge he had been paying zero attention to and slowed the truck to a stop. They were near a large forest and the sun was still shining. Vlad jumped out of the truck and ran for the woods yelling, “I have to go piss!”

Joseph opened his door, stepped out and also gave a big stretch. He walked around the back of the truck to look for the gas can and found it buried under two German soldier uniforms. He didn’t know what they were doing back there so he left them and started to fill the truck up. Vlad had finished his business and was heading back for the truck.

“Hey Vlad, what are two German uniforms doing in the back?”

“Did you think we were going to be able to walk right into Berlin? You moron.”

“Oh my mistake! I forgot we don’t have blue eyes and fucking blonde hair.”

“Hey man, when we get there and I’m in a uniform and I get into Berlin just fine and you get six thousand rounds shot into you…”

“Get back in the truck and shut your mouth.”

“Wait—so are we going to wear the uniforms when we get there or not?” Vlad asked, looking blankly at Joseph from the other side of the truck.

Joseph stood there speechless for a few moments and whispered, “Yeah.”

“Fuck yeah we are.”

They got back in the truck and continued their journey. For the next few hours they drove and talked about older missions they had completed together, reminiscing about the past. Vlad was worried he was going to lose his friend so he tried to savor the short time he had left with him. But all Joseph could think about was Maria. Together in the truck they drove until nightfall. Once darkness fell over the land, Joseph pulled off the road into a small clearing in the woods and parked the truck. There was no better place nearby to sleep so they had to settle for this spot. Vladimir saw this as a perfect time to tell a story of his own.

“Hey Joseph, you want to know how I got this scar?” Vlad said as he pulled up his sleeve to reveal a large scar on his forearm.

“No,” Joseph said as he shut off the truck.

“Well fuck you too. And I prefer the old torn up house—that way I wouldn’t have to look at you,” Vlad managed to mumble out. He removed his Soviet uniform shirt. Wearing only a white undershirt and pants, he no longer looked like a soldier, but more like a farmer.

“Yeah that would be nice, but shit happens I guess.” Joseph opened his door, grabbed his bag and pulled out some bread and a canteen of water. Vladimir saw Joseph starting to eat and said, “Oh shit.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Joseph asked mid bite of his loaf of bread.

“I already ate all the food I packed.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Shut up and give me some of your bread.”

“No way, man. I brought enough food for me to get there and back. You’re a big kid now, you should have packed enough for yourself.”

“Whatever, I’ll go find my own food.”

“In the middle of nowhere? Good luck man,” Joseph said, smiling. He continued to enjoy his food while he watched Vlad wander off into the woods.

“If you’re not here by the morning I’m leaving without you,” he called out.

“Hey buddy?” Vlad yelled back at Joseph. Before Joseph could reply, he yelled, “Fuck off.”

Joseph laughed it off and lay in the truck eating and planning the next and final day of travel.

Vladimir spent the next half hour wandering through the woods. He stumbled across all kinds of berry bushes but was too scared to try any of them. At another point of his search he saw a young deer in the distance eating something on the ground. Vlad thought to himself that he was a stealthy man and could catch this deer and bring him back to Joseph to show off.

Vlad pulled out Sasha and took one small step towards the deer. His step landed him right on a large tree branch that cracked like a gunshot. The deer immediately took off into the night. Vlad stood there feeling like an idiot; he had only taken one step towards his prey before he scared it off.

He put Sasha back in his pocket and continued to wander around the forest in search of food, thinking that perhaps this time he should use his firearm. The more he aimlessly walked around the more he thought to himself there was no way he could find any food in the wild like this. That was, of course, until he finally saw a light several yards away.

It was a shot in the dark, but he began to jog towards it. He was about 200 yards away when he saw it was the light from a small cottage. Once outside the sheltered dwelling, he crept around the side to a window and peaked his head through to see an elderly German couple in their living room reading in the light of their fireplace.

Vlad wondered to himself if he'd have to kill this poor old couple just for a meal. He figured he wouldn't have to because they were no threat to him, and proceeded to walk to the front door. He stood there for a moment before lifting his large hand to knock on the door.

"What the fuck am I doing knocking on some old couple's door at midnight?" Vladimir mumbled to himself. Surprisingly, the door opened revealing an elderly man in his reading glasses and overalls. They both stood there, eyes locked for a several seconds until the ancient man's wife stepped from behind him and broke the stalemate with a welcoming smile.

"Good evening." Vlad said in Russian, his hat in his hand. He gave a little grin back, wondering how seeing a huge Russian in the middle of the night at her door could put such a smile on her face. The elderly German woman made a friendly gesture for him to come in as the old man opened the door for Vlad.

Vlad took a step into the house, surprised that these Germans had let him into their home. As Vlad towering over the both of them, he remembered he was no longer in uniform and that's probably why they'd willingly opened up their home to him.

The elderly couple did not speak as they walked him into the living room and offered him a seat. Vlad figured their silence was due to the language barrier between them, though they'd seemed to know what his initial comment meant. Or more likely it was his demeanor.

Vlad humbly declined and instead gestured with his hand on his stomach that he was hungry. The elderly woman shook her head and walked towards the kitchen. After his wife left the room, the old man motioned for Vlad to follow him over to the fireplace.

There, the old man slowly leaned down and opened a drawer to a table. From the drawer he pulled out a small black box. Vlad looked at the small box in the old man's hands for a minute, puzzled as to what was going on. A tear in his eye, the old man finally opened it. As the box opened a necklace and a small pile of pictures fell out into his hands.

The old woman returned to Vlad and her husband with a bag full of bread, fruit, and pork. Vlad nodded to the old lady with a smile, but was very intrigued as to what the old man held in his hands. The man was able to convey to Vlad that the necklace had been their son's good luck charm through his entire childhood as he showed a series of pictures from the fireplace mantle that showed the boy wearing it at various ages. Vlad still didn't know exactly what the man meant until he drew a four leafed clover on the dirt floor. He'd worn the charm, for 22 years until he was drafted into the war a year ago. He took the necklace off and left it with his parents as he went off to fight for his country. He never returned to them, having died in battle.

"Russicheja?" (Russian, yes?) The Old German asked.

"Dah," Vlad responded.

The old man handed the necklace over to Vladimir. Even though he was a Russian the old man knew that his son's memory would be carried on longer with Vlad rather than with them.

Vlad took the necklace and put it around his neck, to please them as the old man handed him the small picture. The couple held hands as more tears filled their eyes.

Vlad lifted up the picture to look at the young man's face. A single tear filled his eye. However it wasn't a tear formed from sadness. He recognized the youth. He had brutally killed their son over six months ago in a stealth operation.

He was an unnecessary casualty, but that never stopped Vlad. He gave a sad smile and handed the picture back to the old man who had no idea that Vlad was their son's murderer. Vlad shook the old man's hand and gently hugged the elderly lady. He lifted up the bag of food in appreciation and headed for the door.

He stopped as he stepped outside and took a deep breath. Turning back around he saw the old couple watching and smiling at him. They waved at him, and in return he held up his hand like a gun, two fingers as the barrel, and his thumb as the pin. He motioned as if to shoot his “hand gun” at them and smiled as he continued on his way.

The elderly couple, confused about the strange wave they received went back into their home content with such an emotionally charged moment that required no words. Vlad walked away from their home, a huge smile on his face. That hand motion he made towards the elderly couple was the same hand motion he gave to their son before he shot him point blank in the face.

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Vlad returned to Joseph after some time of trying to find his way back. He stopped in the woods to eat the food he was given as well so he didn’t have to share with Joseph.

When he reached the truck he saw that Joseph was already asleep. Tired himself, he decided to join Joseph and fell asleep in the grass right by the truck. The next morning it would be Vlad who would awake first to the warm sun shining on his skin.

He stood up in the completely silent clearing and looked around as he stretched. He enjoyed the peace; it was something he didn’t often get to be a part of. After he’d had enough of the quiet, he threw on his uniform and nudged Joseph. At first, Joseph didn’t wake up. But the ear splitting sound of three German jets screaming overhead did the trick.

“Well, that’s a hell of an alarm clock!” Vlad yelled as he waited out the ringing in his ears.

“We should probably hit the road as soon as we can, Joseph said. “If we travel at a fast enough pace today we could get to Berlin as the sun starts to set.”

“Joseph, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Well, you think you’re different now than you were before you joined the military, right? Like the day you left your girl all the way to today…do you think you’ve changed as a person?”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it. But, I mean I had never killed a man at that point in my life. Now I’ve killed hundreds.”

“Exactly. So do you think Maria will have a different view on you now?”

“A different view on me now? I’m still the man she fell in love with.”

“I know that, and you know that, but I just wonder if she will have the same feelings for a man who has slaughtered men, women, and children.”

“Are you trying to keep me away from her?” Joseph asked, angrily.

“No that’s not it at all; I just want you to be prepared for it.”

“I think it’s best if you just shut your mouth and get in the truck. You’ve already wasted enough of my time.” Joseph’s patience had run out and it was time to get on with the mission.

“Your call.”

Vlad got in the passenger seat and remained silent. Joseph took a deep breath, stepped into the driver side and slammed the door. Before he could start the truck, Vladimir spoke again.

“If we are going to be in Berlin today, we should probably throw on those uniforms in the back.”

Completely aggravated at his friend, Joseph turned to give him a few choice words. When he saw the silly grin on Vlad’s face, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“I hate you,” Joseph said, chuckling. Their friendship meant too much to them to let an argument ruin more than five minutes of their time.

“Hey, now that you’re over your period you should let me drive.”

“I don’t care if you drive, just as long as you get us there before night.”

Vladimir jumped out of the truck and ran to the back to get his German uniform. Joseph halfheartedly joined him. After donning the uniforms, Joseph was still skeptical. The uniforms helped of course, but their dark features and the fact that neither of them could even speak the slightest German worried him. Vlad had no reservations whatsoever. He felt like they could go goose-stepping down Berlin unnoticed. They hopped in the truck and drove towards Berlin.

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After traveling a few hours, Joseph looked over at Vlad and noticed the new necklace he was wearing.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Joseph asked, pointing at Vlad's neck.

"Oh, this piece of shit? I don't remember," Vlad said as he ripped the small chain off his neck and threw it behind him. Joseph wondered about his response but didn't question him further.

Chapter Nine

They continued on their way, periodically discussing their plan—or lack thereof. Neither of them really had a clue as to how they would go about the mission. In the silent moments, Joseph would think about Maria and steal quick glances at her picture.

Abruptly, Joseph asked, “So Vladimir, how did you get that scar on your arm?”

“I knew you would want to know! It’s been eating away at you ever since I brought it up, huh?” Vlad said with a large smile on his face.

“No…I just feel bad about denying you of your own story time earlier.”

“You truly are an asshole, Joseph. But I’ll tell you the story anyway. About a year ago I was in camp late at night, sitting by a fire next to a few other soldiers…”

Joseph interrupted Vladimir by pretending to snore.

“You know what, man?” Vladimir asked, slamming on the brakes and sending Joseph into the dashboard, “I hate you.”

Joseph’s head bounced off the dashboard almost giving him whiplash. As he sat back up in his seat, he reached for his face and told his friend, “Ahh man, I was just messing around. Finish telling me your damn story.”

“One of the soldiers sitting around the fire cut my arm open with a bayonet. That bayonet later became known as Sasha,” Vladimir said in a monotone voice.

Joseph smirked, “Great story, I loved the enthusiasm.”

Vlad looked over at Joseph, a disgusted look on his face. He lifted his hand up above Joseph’s thigh, about to bring it down like a hammer but Joseph’s quick apology stopped the potential blow. Not much followed Vlad’s story other than the occasional smart-ass remark from one of the two or the usual joke.

Chapter Ten

For the next few hours, as they closed in on Berlin, Joseph began to sit straighter in his seat. He was getting more excited with each mile they drove.

In direct contrast to Joseph's elated mood the sky began to darken as they neared the city. Ten miles away, they saw a potential problem. Several yards ahead stood a huge wooden watchtower next to a small radio hut surrounded by several Nazi soldiers.

Approaching the tower they welcomed the familiar tension they both felt just before blood was spilled. As they drew closer, every single pair of Nazi eyes locked on the German truck that wasn't scheduled to enter Berlin at this time. Vlad slowed down just in time to stop in front of two Nazi soldiers with their hands out ordering the truck to halt.

Two Germans at the top of the watchtower focused a bright, intense beam of light on the truck. Two other soldiers walked out of the radio hut and towards the truck. The remaining two sat inside the hut drinking and eating. Six Nazis were now staring at this German truck filled with two Soviets, their guns at the ready.

"We are fucked," Vlad muttered, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"We're definitely fucked if you keep speaking Russian in front of these Nazis."

"Russian is all I know you fucker!"

"I meant to stop talking, you fool."

The two quit speaking as a German soldier walked to the driver side of the truck. Vlad kept his head down. His cap hid his face well enough for the German to not know he was Russian. The German said something they didn't understand. Vlad assumed he was asking them for paperwork so he reached in to the glove box, pretending to look for papers. His hand wrapped around a Tokarev pistol that he had previously placed there. Joseph sat there watching Vlad hold his hand on the gun. He reached over Vlad's arm and switched the truck from park to drive.

This set the guard off. He started yelling and raising his gun to Vlad's head. Vlad quickly brought the pistol out of the glove box and pressed it to the German's chest, quickly letting off two shots. One bullet ripped right through the man's right lung, the other catching an artery in his heart and killing him instantly.

As the man hit the ground, Vlad pressed the gas pedal down and slammed into the two Germans standing in front of the truck, driving them straight into the hut. He crashed into the small building, crushing the two soldiers and taking out one other German in the hut who had been enjoying his dinner.

The two Nazis from on top of the watchtower opened fire on the hut. Bullets ricocheted off the truck, hitting all around the two Russians. Joseph jumped out of the truck and attacked the last living German in the hut. They struggled for a few seconds but Joseph easily overcame him with his overwhelming strength and grabbed both sides of the soldier’s face. He gave one quick tug, snapping the German’s neck with ease. He let the man’s head go as he fell to the floor.

He looked up to see Vlad still in the truck, unconscious. Vlad had hit his head pretty hard in the crash. Joseph grabbed the soldier’s rifle off the ground and ran to the truck to get Vlad out of the way of bullets being fired from the watchtower and from behind the truck. Joseph opened the truck door and felt something warm hit his face. He looked at Vlad and realized his friend has been shot in the shoulder. Joseph pulled him out and lay him down in front of the truck away from the gunfire. He knew the shot wasn’t fatal so he sat down next to Vlad to figure out how to get out of the situation they were in.

He knew there was at least one soldier about 50 feet behind the truck where they had just run over the two men, and there were still two men in the watchtower. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and stood up, revealing his position to the Nazi still on the ground behind the truck.

He let out two shots before bullets started pelting the truck he was hiding behind. He jumped to the ground and lying prone, maneuvered his way around so that he could open up a shot at the German. He shot the very second he saw an open chance and caught the German in the knee. The bullet hit, carrying shards of bone and blood with it through the back of his knee. The German hit the ground face first. Still on the ground, Joseph aimed a kill shot at the top of the man’s head. He lined up and squeezed the trigger. The bullet left the gun and Joseph imagined in slow motion the bullet traveling towards the German lying on the ground.

He saw the bullet enter the man's head and then watched the head explode like a watermelon being smashed by a hammer. Pieces of the head went flying everywhere. The sight was gruesome; blood spurting out of the headless body caked in brains was Joseph's snap back to reality. He looked over at Vlad hoping he was conscious, but no such luck. He knew he couldn't get a shot off on the men in the tower because their vantage point on him was too good.

He sat there for a second but realized he had to act fast before the Germans' backup could arrive. He did the first thing that came to his mind. He quickly jumped back in the truck, threw it in reverse, and backed up into a hail of gunfire. When he was back far enough he put the truck back in drive and floored it towards the tower, bullets flying all around him the entire time. He hit one of the four support beams and drove right through it, carrying part of the wooden structure with him. He kept driving and looked in his rearview mirror in time to see the tower come crashing down behind him. A large dust cloud came with it.

"Holy shit!" Joseph yelled as he wrapped back around to the ruined hut to check on Vlad. He stepped out of the truck and entered the ruined building to see that Vlad was moving, a good sign. He looked around at the dead men and noticed that one of the men was split in half by the collision with the truck. He gazed back at the truck he was driving to see the man's intestines stuck in the grill of the truck. He smirked and walked over to Vlad, helping him to his feet.

"You all right buddy? You picked an awful time to take a nap."

"Why the hell did you let me get shot?"

"Why did I let you?" Joseph just shook his head. "Good to see you're ok, man."

Joseph helped Vlad over to the truck to sit down. Vlad looked around at the carnage but surprisingly didn't even smile, which was uncharacteristic for him. He was too preoccupied with the pain in his shoulder. He looked over to Joseph who had his head down on the truck.

"Joseph."

"What, man?" Joseph mumbled without picking up his head. He was thinking about how there was no way out of this mess. They couldn't drive into Berlin in this truck or with Vlad wearing a blood soaked uniform.

"We're going to need a new truck,"Vlad said, looking at the man's guts stuck in the grill.

“Yeah man, we fucked up,” Joseph said.

“No—I actually think we will be all right.”

“What are you talking about?”

Joseph finally lifted up his head and saw Vladimir pointing at a truck parked behind the remains of the hut they had destroyed. Joseph’s face lit up. He ran over to it and noticed the keys were in the truck as well. He looked up at the sky and smiled. He didn’t believe in God, but he knew this was a miracle. He ran back over to Vlad sitting on the truck with a hand on his injured shoulder in a daze.

“I’m also going to need a new uniform. I’m drenched in my own goddamn blood.”

“I’m way ahead of you!” Joseph yelled back as he ran off. Looking at all the dead bodies, he was hoping to find one that wasn’t too bloodied. He didn’t bother checking the headless man or the man that was split in half. He managed to get a uniform off a man from the crumbled watchtower.

He quickly removed the clothes off of the corpse and ran them back over to Vlad. Vladimir spent the next few minutes wrapping his shoulder and putting on the new uniform that was clearly too small for him. Vladimir struggled to squeeze into the uniform with only the use of one of his arms. When he was done he looked like he had just gotten some hand-me-downs from his older sister.

“Why do the Germans dress themselves in doll clothes?” Vlad spat out as the material under his arms ripped.

As he was doing this Joseph was running back and forth carrying their things from one truck to the other. They were now all set to head into Berlin. Fresh uniforms and a brand new truck made Joseph feel invincible. Nothing else was in their way. A few miles more and Joseph was home free.

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The next several miles were quiet as Joseph was too focused to speak and Vlad was still in shock from his injury. The bullet that Vladimir took to his left shoulder caught his collarbone and came out through his armpit. Though it wasn’t fatal, it certainly was painful.

They drove through the German territory, passing citizens and soldiers everywhere but fitting in as if they were Nazis themselves. Joseph was in Berlin before he knew it. He tipped his cap to passing soldiers as he drove around the streets of Berlin, having no idea where he was going.

He reached for the glove box to find the yellow packet from his briefing. Inside the envelope was a picture of the factory. It was a large brick building with lit up red letters on the outside spelling out something in German. Joseph circled the streets over and over again looking for this building. He was starting to panic as he noticed that he was attracting attention of the nearby civilians. He pulled over to get a good long look at the picture of the factory.

He heard a German soldier yell at him and turned to see him walking towards the truck. Joseph's heart started to race; it was like a beating drum. He was terrified and motionless until he heard Vladimir speak.

"Joseph, I can see the red letters of the building right over there."

Vlad pointed down an alley where he could barely make out one of the letters on the building. Thinking Vladimir must have the vision of a hawk to catch that, Joseph looked over to the approaching solider. He shrugged and sped off down the passageway. The soldier stopped where he was and shaking his head, put the lighter back in his pocket. All he had wanted was a smoke.

Joseph drove down the alley until he was now on the side of the building. He parked the car and saw that two guards stood outside the building's entrance. Joseph looked at Vlad who was staring directly at the two guards.

"We are right in the heart of Germany. You still up for this?" Joseph asked Vlad who never took his eyes off the soldiers.

"I'll get the one on the right," Vlad said. Joseph smirked.

"I can always count on you."

Chapter Eleven

The two Soviets stepped out of the vehicle, attracting the attention of the guards. The four men locked eyes and all nodded their heads as if to show that they were all comrades.

Vlad and Joseph both grabbed their bags filled with guns, ammo, and explosives. The two guards lit up smokes and averted their attention elsewhere. Vlad and Joseph walked towards the two guards until they were all face-to-face in the dimly lit alley.

The two Germans looked shocked, and asked them something in German. But as one of them finished asking the question the cigarette in his mouth fell to the ground. The soldier let out a grunt and fell back into the wall, sliding down to the ground. Vladimir had shoved Sasha right into the man's gut and sent it up so far that his own hand was inside the man's abdomen. A river of blood spilled out onto the ground.

It was already too late for the other soldier when he looked over to see that his buddy was on the ground bleeding out. He quickly snapped his head back to look at Joseph who thrust his hands at the guard's face. Both of his hands connected and Joseph began to gouge the man's eyes. Before his screams could fill the air, attracting unwanted attention, Joseph pushed the eyeballs deep into the man's brain killing him instantly.

Then Joseph pulled the man's head forward by his eye sockets and shoved it back towards the brick wall. Once his head connected with the wall a loud crack ensured that the man's skull was broken. Joseph let go of the man and he sank to the ground.

Vlad and Joseph said nothing as they opened the door to the factory and dragged the bodies inside, closing the door behind them. Locking the door, they looked around. Lucky for them the factory wasn't running right now, probably a factor playing into the German's defeat. But they didn't mind; it made their jobs easier.

It was dark and very cramped in the building with machines and plane parts scattered on conveyer belts. The ceiling was so high up they couldn't see it in the dark. It was an eerie place to be; the plane parts all around made it harder to see in the dark factory. None of the machines were running; it was so deathly quiet Joseph could practically hear his heart beating in the silence.

He opened up his bag to reveal explosives he had packed before they left. The sound of the bag opening echoed throughout the building.

"What the hell are those for? Attracting every damn German in Berlin?" Vlad asked. He was shocked to see explosives.

"No. Part of my briefing was to blow up the factory so that after I kill the factory's owner, they couldn't hire a new man to run it."

"Why the hell do you even need to kill the owner if you're just going to blow up the factory?"

"This way I get more satisfaction, and Viktor gets more hype as the officer who killed the man leading this plane factory."

"I guess."

"Do you think you can set these explosives up?" Joseph asked, his eyes staring off in the distance.

"What the hell are you talking about? You look just fine and I have a fucking bullet in me!"

"I have to go deal with the owner."

"Sorry to burst your bubble there buddy, but this place is closed down right now."

Joseph said nothing as he pointed into the distance where he could see light coming from a room at the top of a staircase. Through a window he could see a man shuffling around.

"Ahh, all right. You do what you have to do; I'll set these explosives up," Vlad said as he grabbed the Composition B charges from Joseph. Joseph didn't say anything; he was lost in the moment.

He was again fixated on how this man was keeping him away from Maria. He slowly walked off towards the staircase at the end of the building. Each step he took sent a slight echo through the building. Joseph thought to himself the old saying "the quiet before the storm" fit the situation perfectly as he passed by the plane parts all around him.

Each time he passed one he had to glance back to make sure there wasn't a person lurking behind him.

Vlad shrugged, threw the bag of Comp B over his good shoulder and started to look around for good places to set up the explosives in order for the maximum damage to be done. He would spend a lot of time feeling around with his hand instead of actually visually seeing where he was placing the charges.

Joseph's mind was racing; thoughts were flying in and out of his mind, from the first time he had ever killed a man to the first time he met Maria. It was clear that Joseph was no longer the man he used to be.

He was almost possessed by something more powerful, something utterly bent on the destruction of this man who owned the factory in which he stood. One slow step after another Joseph made his way towards the staircase, his fists clenched so hard he was almost digging his fingers through the skin of his hands. Reaching the staircase, he stood on the first step and looked up to the lit room, mere feet away.

He lifted up his foot, set it down on the first step and was immediately hit by the memory of the day he was taken from Maria.

"Joseph! What's going on" Maria screamed as she came running out from their home. She stood watching as three Russians were forcibly taking Joseph towards an army jeep. Joseph struggled enough to turn and see Maria running towards him. Before she could reach him she was grabbed and restricted by another soldier. This sent Joseph in a rage. He turned to one of the men carrying him towards the jeep, cocked his head back and flung his skull towards the man. Joseph had knocked the man to the ground by the force of the head butt. He had also broken his own nose. Joseph ripped his arm loose from the second man who was holding him. Joseph stood there, staring at the man as blood was rushing from his now broken nose. The soldier raised his fists ready to fight, but before anything could happen a loud crack interrupted the situation. The sound came from a man by the name of David shooting a gun into the air to avoid any more fighting. David was a short, stocky, muscular man dressed in a Sergeant's uniform with a buzz hair cut. He had a scruffy goatee and spoke in a booming voice.

"Joseph T. Maslov?" David called out to make sure the man they were taking away was in fact the man they were looking for. Joseph snapped out of his rage and looked over to the Sergeant.

"That's my name, but what are you doing here, and what do you want with me?"

"We are going around the motherland looking for able men to help fight off the spread of the Germans."

"I didn't sign up for this war though," Joseph said, calming down and wiping the blood from his face onto his shirt sleeve.

"Neither did I young man, but it was Stalin himself who ordered every able body to fight in the war."

"So there is no way to get out of this?" Joseph asked as he looked back to Maria who was no longer in the custody of the soldier.

"The only way out of this war is fighting until we win, or getting buried," David said with a stern look on his face. Tears filled Maria's eyes as Joseph turned back to David.

"Can I at least say my goodbyes?"

"Make it quick."

David and the three soldiers headed back to the jeep to give them a moment of privacy. Joseph took Maria's hand and walked her back to their home. Once they set foot in the comfort of their home Maria threw her arms around Joseph and pressed her tearstained face into his shoulder.

"You're not really going, are you?"

"I have no choice, Maria."

She began to weep and shake uncontrollably. Joseph sat her down and tried to calm her.

"Maria I will return. I promise, even if it means I have to kill every single German myself with nothing more than the hands I was born with, I will come back to you."

You could hear the unsure tone in his voice as he said this, but it was enough to calm Maria for the time being. He wiped her tears away and pressed his forehead to hers. He heard honking coming from the jeep outside and knew his time for goodbyes was over. David was becoming impatient. Joseph, feeling better after calming Maria down, went to grab his boots. He returned only to see that Maria had a smile on her face, one she was clearly faking.

"What's with the smile, my dear?" Joseph asked as he sat down next to her to put his boots on.

"I have no reason to be upset, right? I mean you said you would come back to me. All I have to do is be strong and wait for you."

Chapter Twelve

Another thought of the horn blaring outside the house was enough to send Joseph back to reality. He was once again standing on the staircase, staring up at the lit room. He shook his head to clear it, wiped the sweat from his face and proceeded to climb the seemingly never-ending staircase.

He felt weak, his legs growing tired and his vision blurring. Each step became a struggle. He found himself having to grip the handrail as tight as he could and put all the muscles in his body into lifting up each foot to the next step. Vlad, who was still in search of the best spots for the explosions, looked up at Joseph, thinking he truly was a sad sight. He noticed that Joseph was drenched in sweat, mumbling to himself, and struggling to go up one step.

"Hey Joseph, are you alright?" Vlad said just loud enough for Joseph to hear. Joseph turned towards Vlad, a blank look on his face. Vlad took the awkward silence as a yes and quickly turned around to continue his job.

Joseph turned back to the door at the top of the stairs and slowly pressed on. The entire time Joseph was in a haze and had no idea what was going on around him. He couldn't remember anything from the first step to the last step he now stood on.

It was as if he woke up when he got to that last step. He was now within reaching distance of the door. To say he felt butterflies in his stomach was an understatement. He refrained from vomiting with a large swallow and wrapped his hand around the doorknob.

He tried to look through the window on the door but the glass was covered by dust. As he turned the knob he noticed the nameplate on the door said, "Wolfgang". He now knew the name of the man he was seconds from killing. Joseph threw the door open, startling the man inside.

The small man jumped out of his seat, which was facing away from the door, and quickly turned to face this hate fueled tyrant. . This man stood no higher than five foot six and weighed no more than 120 pounds. He was only 30 years old but looked closer to 50.

It was obvious working at the factory had aged him. He wore a pair of large glasses and a black suit. Wolfgang demanded what the man was doing. Wolfgang noticed the confused look on the man's face and upon closer inspection he realized that Joseph was most likely Russian. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Joseph, who was surprised to hear the little man speak Russian, replied "Are you in charge of this factory?"

Though it didn't really matter to him; he was going to kill him either way.

"Yes, in fact I own this factory. However, before the war, we simply manufactured pots, pans, and silverware. Once the war started my business and I were taken over and I forced to make plane parts."

Joseph ignored the man's words and grit his teeth. Enough with the chitchat—he was ready to kill the man where he stood. But before he could, Wolfgang interrupted him once more.

"If you don't mind me asking young man…what is your name?"

The man seemed to be buying time before his death. He knew this assassin was his angel of death. Joseph calmed down long enough to answer.

"My name is Joseph."

"Ahh, and what is it that you want with me, young Joseph?"

"I am here to kill you," Joseph answered matter-of-factly, expecting the man to cringe or cry like the many before him have, but Wolfgang had already accepted this as a fact. Joseph took a step towards the man, who no longer seemed to care for life itself.

"Are you not afraid of me?"

"Why should I be afraid of a mortal man? The Nazi army took my life away years ago when they forced my son into their army. They took my factory from me destroyed my relationship with my wife by turning me into nothing more than a machine that works every hour of everyday. To answer your question young Joseph, no, I am not afraid of you."

Joseph, who had no remorse for this man took his words as an insult. He reached for the man and grabbed him by his collar, lifting him into the air. Wolfgang's glasses fell off his face and smashed to the floor. Joseph used all of his might to throw the small man against the brick wall of his office. The loud smash attracted the attention of Vlad, who was just placing the final detonator.

"You could be a little quieter up there, we are only in the middle of Berlin. You know, that place where the Nazis come from?" Vlad mumbled under his breath as he started to make his way upstairs to the office. Joseph walked over to where Wolfgang had landed. Rolling back and forth in pain, Wolfgang cried, "Please! Just put me out of my misery!"

The man wanted a quick and painless death, but Joseph had spent months learning to hate him above all others. A quick, painless death was not enough to satisfy his thirst for blood. Joseph grabbed the man by his throat and pressed him against the wall.

Joseph cocked back his fist and repeatedly struck the man's face. Punch after punch the man's face became covered in blood. Vlad was just nearing the final few steps to the office when the window of the door shattered and little pieces of glass flew towards him. Vladimir was startled and looked up to see the bloody and swollen face of a man. Joseph had thrown Wolfgang into the door face first. Joseph pulled his body from the door and threw him on the floor of the office.

Vladimir opened what remained of the door and asked, "Can you just kill him so we can get out of here?"

Joseph looked over to Vladimir and pulled a handgun out of his holster.

"You want me to kill him?" Joseph cried as he pointed the gun down at Wolfgang, a terrifying grin on his face. He squeezed the trigger two times sending bullets right into Wolfgang's leg. The sound of the shots echoed through the factory and was certain to attract attention from outside.

"What the fuck, man? We are right in the middle of Germany—you can't just go firing off rounds here. Snap his goddamn neck and let's get the hell out of here!" Vladimir exclaimed. He was beginning to fear for his life, but Joseph showed no concern for the situation they were in as he pulled the trigger two more times. This time he struck Wolfgang once in his chest—not a fatal wound, and another struck his left bicep.

"Joseph, man, you need to stop! You are making too much noise!" Vlad yelled as he looked down at Wolfgang bleeding out from his wounds. He lay there silent, covered in blood and gore. Before Vladimir could say anymore his attention was diverted to the sound of banging on the side door they had entered earlier.

Vladimir began to panic and ran towards the door to the office to see if he could spot anyone. Joseph knelt down next to Wolfgang and glared at him. Wolfgang said nothing; his life was slowly being taken from his body.

Joseph gave a heavy sigh and pressed his handgun against Wolfgang's chest, right where his heart would be, but instead of shooting him there and ending his suffering he dragged the barrel of the gun down to the man's ribcage and let off another round.

A few seconds after blood began to spurt from the new wound more gunshots could be heard, and this time not from Joseph. It was Nazi soldiers shooting the doorknob off the locked side door to the building. Vladimir reached for his rifle. Joseph paid no attention as he watched the life slowly fade from Wolfgang's battered body. Joseph stared, fascinated. He loved every moment of Wolfgang slowly slipping away from life's grasp.

"Joseph, we need to go right now. There are at least ten of them down there, and they've spotted the other bodies," Vlad whispered.

Once again Joseph ignored Vladimir's plea. Vladimir had no choice but to fire down at the Nazis headed for the only lit up room in the whole building. Vladimir rested his rifle on the broken window of the door and fired off two rounds towards the soldiers from his SVT rifle.

The first shot whizzed by, hitting nothing. The second shot caught a soldier right in his hip, dropping him to the ground. It was now a one-sided firefight in the factory. A wave of bullets came firing into the office from below giving Vlad no chance to return fire; the only thing he could do was find cover by crouching behind the door.

His cover wouldn't last for long; he heard footsteps on the stairs to the office. He felt as if he was fighting these men alone. He could see a German rushing towards him.

Vlad lifted up his gun and shot the man three times in the chest, killing him where he stood, but as Vlad shot the man he felt a bullet hit his shoulder right next to his previous wound. He let out a shriek as blood spattered on his face and sank down against the wall next to the door.

Joseph remarkably didn't flitch or react to the bullets hitting all around him or even to his best friend's shriek of pain. Joseph could see that Wolfgang was seconds from bleeding out. He didn't want him to die like that; he wanted the final blow. Putting his handgun up to Wolfgang's head he held it there, savoring the moment.

Before he could pull the trigger a sound of glass shattering caught his attention. He looked up to see that a grenade had been thrown through a window into the room, and had landed within a foot of Wolfgang's body. He gazed at it for no more than a couple of seconds before a loud sound followed by a blinding white light engulfed him and he was thrown across the room.

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Joseph could just make out what sounded like a German man yelling. He thought he had been knocked unconscious. He couldn't understand what the soldier was saying but he could make out that the soldier had yelled down to his commanding officer that there were three KIA in the room.

Joseph was confused to hear that the soldier could make such a mistake as to not counting the dead correctly. As Joseph sat up he saw that Wolfgang had been blown to pieces by the grenade, his blood and insides everywhere.

He looked around the gore-covered room and as the smoke cleared he saw another body. He stared at it, not wanting to believe what he saw. It was the body of his best friend, who was so badly torn up by the explosion that he could barely even tell who it was. As he stared at the mangled body he heard more Germans heading for the room.

Joseph let out a scream of anger as he got up quickly and ran for Vlad's rifle. As he reached the gun he knelt down to grab it. He tried to pick it up with all his might, but it wouldn't budge. He was shocked that he couldn't pick the gun up and even more shocked that the soldiers who had walked into the room hadn't shot him yet.

Joseph felt a chill rush down his spine. He turned back to Wolfgang's bloodied remains. With relief he realized the body next to Wolfgang's wasn't his friend's body after all. Then he felt a sinking feeling. He realized the mangled mess lying there on the floor was his.

Chapter thirteen

Viktor sat in his chair behind the table where he assigned his soldier's missions. It had been eight days since he'd sent Vladimir and Joseph to Berlin.

He knew they were dead at this point but sat there and waited anyway in disbelief. Viktor never liked informing the families that their sons or fathers had died doing some mission.

However this time, Viktor felt that it was his duty to tell the families face to face, instead of sending them a letter saying how truly sorry he was for their loss or some bullshit like that.

Viktor took a deep breath and stood up from his seat, pushed his chair in and headed for the door. As he stepped outside he was met by a beautiful blue sky and a warming touch from the sunshine. He soaked it in and headed for his truck. Viktor was lucky when it came to Vladimir because he had no family to inform of his death. But Joseph had Maria, and Viktor hated that he had to be the one to tell her.

For the next few days Viktor drove towards the farm where Joseph was taken.

Viktor could think of nothing to say. He knew something made up on the spot such as; "he was a good soldier and served us well" wasn't enough.

Before he knew it he arrived at a beautiful farm. Flowers grew rampant all around; the grass a lush green.

As Viktor got out of the truck, he noticed an eerie silence that surrounded the small farm and home.

He walked around the property for a while, soaking in the beauty of it all. It seemed to have been untouched for years and the vegetation had just majestically grown all around.

After exploring for a while longer he glanced up at the small house to see that it, unlike the land around it, wasn't a beautiful sight. The house was run down and falling apart. He thought to himself that Maria must have been so devastated that she let her house decay around her.

He walked up to the doorstep and knocked. After waiting for a response that did not come, he slowly opened the door and yelled inside, indicating that he was going to enter. Still no response. He walked around for a bit in the dusty silence of the home, exploring the first floor.

He felt as if he was being watched, and the entire time he was covered in goose bumps. He had a strange feeling being in the home. As he finished looking around the first floor he heard the faint scream of a woman from upstairs. He quickly rushed to the staircase leading up. As he reached the stairs he saw the shadow of a person enter a room.

He darted up the stairs and into the room the shadow had entered. He saw what seemed like an almost empty room with nothing more than a bed. He walked to the bed and looking down at the floorboards saw the decayed remains of a woman. Next to the pile of bones was a small handgun. He put a hand over his mouth. The body was so decayed at this point it seemed she must have shot herself years ago. A cold touch swept up over him, which he took as a sign to leave.

Before he did so he picked up a small piece of paper that had been laid carefully on the bed and read it.

My dearest Joseph,

I knew the day you left to fight this God forsaken war that my life was over. You had lied to me. You had not meant to of course, but I knew you were never coming back to me and I could not go on without you. I will wait patiently on the other side for your return. –Your Maria

Viktor stood by his truck, speechless. No one's death has ever affected him like Maria's had. He knew deep down that Joseph would never return from Berlin. Hell, it was the capitol of the country they were at war with. How could any soldier possibly complete a mission like that?

He turned to his truck and opened the door. He sat back in his seat and slammed the door shut. As he started up the engine, he heard the same woman's voice as earlier, only this time it wasn't a scream, but sobbing. As he started to drive off he looked in his rearview mirror to see the silhouette of a woman standing in the dusty window of the upstairs room—the same room in which Maria had taken her life.

Chills filled Viktor's body as he sped off. Miles down the road when he'd finally lost his goose bumps, Viktor stomped on the brakes and almost swerved into a tree to avoid hitting a man standing in the road. When Viktor looked up from the near accident, he saw faded image of a Russian soldier carrying a bag over his shoulder, a helmet in the other hand. Viktor sat in his truck and watched the man slowly walk towards the direction of Maria's home red sky and grey clouds hanging overhead of him.

"Joseph?"

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